Managing Theater Engagement Planning

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DURING THE 1998 Quadrennial Defense Review, then Deputy Secretary of Defense John J. Hamre stated to the House National Security Committee that to meet challenges of an uncertain future, new operational concepts and organizations are needed to fully exploit new technologies as well as a "hedge against threats that are unlikely but which would have disproportionate security implications."[1] Hamre called for a transformation in military information management practices that would draw from the best business information management practices arising from the ongoing revolution in business affairs. The goal, of course, was to gain more efficiency in the use of national resources to increase the country's military capability without sacrificing combat readiness. This struggle between the efficient use of resources and the need to accomplish organizational goals is a challenge for all organizations. That struggle within the Department of Defense (DOD) is the focus of this article. To this end, the article will detail some of the problems inherent in developing a management information system (MIS) designed to satisfy all levels of decisionmakers in our government.

DOD needs to reestablish a national-level MIS to collect, analyze, sort, and manage information about the resources used in theater security cooperation (TSC) so that the nation uses its limited resources most efficiently. Although micromanagement might ensue, this practice accords with the current best business practices. Gathering pertinent, reliable data and usable information allows key DOD managers at the national level to make timely and informed resource decisions.

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The authors gathered information for this article by visiting all the staffs of the geographical unified commands from December 2001 to March 2002. During these visits, they interviewed senior military staff officers such as the Director of Logistics and Security Assistance, J4; the Director of Strategy, Policy, and Plans, J5; as well as one political adviser (POLAD) and one deputy POLAD. They also spent many hours interviewing many security assistance officers and country desk officers of these same staffs.

Management Information Systems

MIS have been around as long as the concept of management itself. Their central purpose is to help managers gather and organize data in a format that allows them to make quality decisions in a timely manner. Before computers, typed, handwritten, or oral reports met managers' information and decision-support needs. In colonial India, British administrators relied on an MIS composed of runners carrying and delivering reports. Today, computers gather, organize, and share data; however, the volume of information is such that managers cannot process all the information presented at a given time.[2]

Editor's note: When the authors researched material for this article, the terms 'theater engagement planning (TEP)' and 'theater engagement planning management information system (TEPMIS)' were in use. The terms are now 'theater security cooperation (TSC)' and 'theater security cooperation management information system (TSCMIS),' respectively. The new terms have been used throughout the article.

One of the fundamental challenges of developing an MIS that meets the organization's needs is the tension between an organization's information system managers and its operations managers. In a classic article on this problem, it was noted that "On the one hand, top management—particularly in large companies—is increasingly seeking more sophisticated uses of computer technology. But, on the other, the MIS manager, the gatekeeper to the computer, is frequently excluded from the corporate planning process…. His input is solicited after key decisions have been made—if at all. Such exclusion can lead to faulty decisionmaking, at least when information systems are involved."[3]

Since the combatant commanders did not get additional resources from DOD for feeding this centralized TSCMIS process, they preferred to track their respective cooperation activities independently. After all, they had to rely on their own resources to support these activities. Unfortunately, the absence of a centralized TSCMIS created an information gap at the national level as to the use of resources.

Theater Security Cooperation

To implement the President's National Security Strategy of 1997, DOD either responds to crises or shapes conditions. To respond to crises, DOD uses the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP). The JSCP provides guidance to combatant commanders to accomplish tasks and missions based on current military capabilities. It apportions resources to combatant commanders based on military capabilities resulting from complete program and budget actions and intelligence. The various JSCP reporting formats that provide senior leaders a readiness picture are well established and constitute an MIS.

To address the shaping task, each geographic combatant commander develops a TSC plan that identifies shaping activities drawn from the National Security Strategy of 1997. DOD advises combatant commanders to keep combatant command missions separate from services' Title X responsibilities. To deconflict these missions, the geographic combatant commanders and executive agents (EAs) analyze, prioritize, and incorporate into the TSC process relevant TSC data from supporting combatant commanders, the services, and defense agencies.[4]

The shaping strategy presents a complicated challenge. Forces provide substantial levels of peacetime cooperation that draw on the full range of shaping instruments. These include stationing forces abroad permanently; deploying forces abroad either rotationally or temporarily for exercises; conducting combined training; initiating military-to-military interactions; and participating in programs such as defense cooperation, security assistance, International Military Education and Training (IMET), and international arms cooperation. Furthermore, forces must be able to sustain such cooperation within acceptable personnel tempo levels.[5]

A combatant commander is not the only one to identify cooperation objectives and develop cooperation plans for his theater; many other government agencies, such as sister services, the Security Assistance Office, the Department of State, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and host nations do so as well. All these actors pursue various cooperation activities; some conflict, and some coincide. As a result of competing cooperation interests and objectives, suboptimizing resources is always a danger. Peter Drucker notes that "the challenges for organizational decision makers in the 21st century will be similar to an orchestra leader, that is, making good music from a collage of experts trying to demonstrate their own brilliance."[6] To counter this threat of suboptimization, the search to find a common ground by which to achieve strategic unanimity is difficult at best.

Gathering timely information at the national level on the multitudinous shaping events in any given theater is essential to using limited resources wisely. In addition, such information will portray not only current activities but also will help identify future trends. When trying to determine which shaping activities the United States should pursue and to what extent, the need for an MIS becomes obvious. The Theater Security Cooperation Management Information System (TSCMIS) seeks to track cooperation activities that best serve national objectives as articulated by the National Security Council, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the Department of State.

Theater Security Cooperation Management Information Systems

The Defense Planning Guidance, Fiscal Years 2002-2007, dated 6 April 2000, required DOD to develop a process to integrate military cooperation activities conducted around the globe.[7] Consequently, DOD established, and the Director of Strategy, Policy, and Plans, J5, managed, a centralized

TSCMIS to assess the progress of the myriad cooperation activities that combatant commanders were conducting in their respective areas of responsibility (AORs); however, it was later eliminated for two reasons. The first was that the time and effort expended on TSCMIS reports were disproportionate to the benefits received. The second was that TSCMIS was not tied to the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System, the resource allocation system. The combatant commanders had little incentive to prepare reports for TSCMIS because the combatant commanders did not receive an increase in resources when they did. Since the combatant commanders did not get additional resources from DOD for feeding this centralized TSCMIS process, they preferred to track their respective cooperation activities independently. After all, they had to rely on their own resources to support these activities. Unfortunately, the absence of a centralized TSCMIS created an information gap at the national level as to the use of resources.

Although DOD's centralized TSCMIS program has been eliminated, all unified commands still operate a regional TSCMIS to track their cooperation activities. These MIS might not be called TSCMIS; they might not even be following a standard TSCMIS template. Even so, they keep the unified commands informed about the status of the shaping activities in their respective AORs. As responsible commanders and good stewards of national resources, combatant commanders faithfully track these events.

As combatant commanders execute their plans to provide security and stability to their regions, gathering data that leads to useful information becomes critical. Such information is crucial in determining which actions provide the best return on a combatant commander's use of his own, and ultimately national, resources.

To enable combatant commanders to manage their own TSC plans more successfully, a system is required that ensures their warfighting capabilities are not degraded. Therefore, regardless of what each combatant commander may call his MIS, it must maintain the appropriate visibility of critical information, thereby permitting combatant commanders time to make sound resource decisions. Such decisions will prevent the weakening of U.S. warfighting capabilities and enhance the United States' national interest in an AOR. The challenge becomes how best to thread all the information garnered from these everyday military activities to create a continuous information flow.

The need for a reporting system where decisionmakers at all echelons of the government have the necessary information to make appropriate decisions becomes obvious. Although the absence of centralized TSCMIS reporting reduces the administrative burden on combatant commanders' staffs, the cost is a lack of global coordination among cooperation activities. Furthermore, the lack of a centralized system places pressure on DOD, Department of State, and congressional information systems to supply the required information when determining the best use of national resources. In essence, this process looks suspiciously similar to what businesspeople do on an everyday basis—coordinating operational decisions that affect the organization's strategic direction.

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Sorting Out TSC Priorities

Now that combatant commanders bear the full burden of developing a TSC tracking system, the complexity of managing all the associated tasks is overwhelming. That is, even after activity managers identify adequate resources, coordinating these activities with more than 30 activities becomes a daunting task. Therefore, a combatant commander's TSCMIS must provide adequate visibility over these actions in an effort to implement both the combatant commander's and the respective ambassador's objectives. Hopefully, such actions will provide stability to a region, thereby promoting the national interest of both the United States as well as the affected nation.

To assess cooperation activities, combatant commanders have instituted a process called the regional working group (RWG). These RWGs are designed to bring together the various agencies within the combatant commander's AOR. These organizations, in turn, help them list and prioritize cooperation activities. According to the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), RWGs are designed to—

- Provide critical feedback that assesses past shaping efforts and aids in the design of future efforts.

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- Prioritize regions and countries within the AOR and any subsequent shaping activities.
- Apportion shaping activities based on a collaborative effort.
- Develop shaping guidance that optimizes the use of combatant commanders' resources.[8]

RWGs have the potential to ease significantly the difficulties of coordinating cooperation activities. Not only do senior-level decisionmakers need systems to harvest raw data, but they also need people who can convert raw data into usable information. Such personnel can initiate meaningful dialogue on core issues that lead to the best possible cooperation options. TSCMIS is critical to gathering reliable information to help senior leaders make the best possible cooperation decisions.

The Problems of Instituting an MIS

Developing a DOD-wide TSCMIS is a rational course of action by which to gain visibility of DOD cooperation activities; however, it does pose many challenges. These issues include connectivity between users and coordinating agencies, system administration, software configuration, and security accreditation and certification. Also, there is the threat of micromanagement: the more information an organization gathers, the more senior leaders make decisions at lower organizational levels.

The most challenging aspect of instituting a DOD-wide TSCMIS is ensuring that the MIS suits the respective organizational level. Establishing a common base for TSCMIS, with global connectivity, implies that combatant commanders' cooperation activities are sufficiently similar, to the degree the activities can be placed in general categories and compiled in a roll-up of such activities. The problem with this procedure is that similar cooperation activities in various combatant commanders' AORs do not always provide similar results. Caution is required to ensure that a linear cause and effect correlation is not assumed by inexperienced individuals interpreting the raw data and/or drawing unfounded inferences from subsequent information.

This leads to the second challenge of instituting TSCMIS—the struggle to keep well-trained country desk and security assistance officers on board. This issue was identified during visits with combatant commanders' staffs between September 1999 and February 2001. During the interview sessions, it was noted that some of the country desk officers have been associated with their respective countries for many years as a foreign area officer or through personal experiences.

Two challenges arise from this situation. The first is the need to ensure that country desk officers are properly trained to understand the input needs to TSCMIS. Of course, with increased computer literacy, this becomes a minor impediment. However, in the process of translating raw data to usable information, if the TSCMIS does not meet the common-sense standard of country desk officers and their supervisors, a double reporting system may be created; that is, a system to meet the demands of TSCMIS reporting and a local system.

The second challenge, and perhaps the more difficult one, is the experience needed by desks officers and unified command staffers that will permit them to make recommendations based on the merits of a particular cooperation course of action. With the turbulence noted previously within combatant commanders' staffs, maintaining an experienced staff can be a challenge. Unfortunately, the data placed into a well-designed TSCMIS program may not be the data needed to develop usable information by the decisionmakers. If the TSCMIS is to be a valuable tool for decisionmakers, care must be taken to ensure that not only is the design both valid and reliable but also that subjective evaluations are as valid as is humanly possible.

Final Thoughts

Where does this leave us in regard to the charge to meet challenges of an uncertain future with new operational concepts coupled with the exploitation of new technologies? Perhaps, the answer lies in a total systems approach to the cooperation situation. First, regardless of what the current administration's strategy is on cooperation activities, the United States can ill afford to assume an isolation mentality, especially in light of the terrorist events on 11 September 2001. Influencing external forces to benefit one's organization is a natural phenomenon that will continue.

Second, senior decisionmakers at all levels will always want to influence the direction of their respective organization and the use of its resources. Find-

ing ways to maintain the pulse of an organization is both natural and necessary for those in authority.

Third, tension will always exist between the freedom that commanders want in order to execute their missions and the pitfall of optimizing their operation at the expense of the organization. The possibility of suboptimization exists. Nevertheless, a balance between the parts and its whole must be achieved. DOD and the U.S. Government are no exceptions to this organizational struggle.

Fourth, serious attention needs to be given to the career patterns of country desk officers for all the services if the system is to have a reliable source of frontline personnel capable of providing valid and reliable input to TSCMIS. The experience factor is key to understanding the cultural context of all our global relationships.

Finally, TSCMIS and systems like it will not go away. In a recent issue of *Inside the Army*, Dr. David S.C. Chu, Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, stated that readiness reporting needs to change to reflect "the rich menu of things a unit might actually do and not just fixate on one element of the spectrum of missions that the Army is asked to do today."[9] He continued by saying that an elaborate system that requires one to fill out forms is probably not a good idea. The real need is to explore the extent to which normal transaction records can be used to determine readiness. "Given modern computing power, can we use these records to give us what a business would have, which is an instantaneous view of what is happening in the field? It builds on what you are already doing at the operating level and it has the further advantage in that, if something is occurring that you think is an anomaly, you can drill down quickly and find what is going on."[10] Sounds suspiciously like a centrally controlled TSCMIS.

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The basic theme for this article was to address the attempt by a government agency to streamline its information-gathering efforts to enhance its decisionmaking. Individuals in authority in any organization attempt to make informed decisions. Yet, as an organization increases in complexity and size, its capability to capture relevant data and develop pertinent information for decisionmakers is continually challenged.

Using the best business practices seems like a natural step for government agencies; however, like so many promising solutions for any organization, there is more involved than simply implementing a better business practice. Government agencies, like all organizations, continue to evolve. Yet, innovative practices usually will not mend broken or outdated organizational structures or outmoded ways of doing business. A healthy organization is the result of good management and leadership practices that are imbedded in sound, holistic critical thinking. ***MR***

NOTES

1. John Hamre, Improved Business Practices Will Improve Military Effectiveness: Statement of Deputy Defense Secretary John J. Hamre to the National Security Committee, Washington, March 11,1998. Speech, United States Department of Defense Publication, Volume 13, Number 15 at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/1998/t19980311-depsecdef.html>.
2. See James P. Beniger, *The Control Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
3. Margaret Price, "MIS: Still Outside the Inner Circle," *Perspectives on Management*, 5th ed., J.H. Donnelly, Jr., James L. Gibson and John M. Ivanevich, Business Publications, Inc., 1984, 304-10.
4. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual (CJCSM) 3113.01A, *Theater Engagement Planning* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 31 May 2000), 2.
5. Ibid., section A, A1-A14.
6. Peter Drucker, "The Coming of the New Organization," *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 1988), 45-53.
7. Defense Planning Guidance FY 2002-2007, 6 April 2000.
8. U.S. European Command Theater Engagement Planning Briefing, 1998.
9. Thomas Duffy, "Administration Developing New Military Readiness Reporting System," *Inside the Army* (23 August 2001), 3.

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